

FIELD

Gear-up for that fall hunt by familiarizing yourself with how to determine whether a mule deer buck will measure up before taking a shot.

MULE DEER
THE FIRST
IN A
SERIES

JUDGING

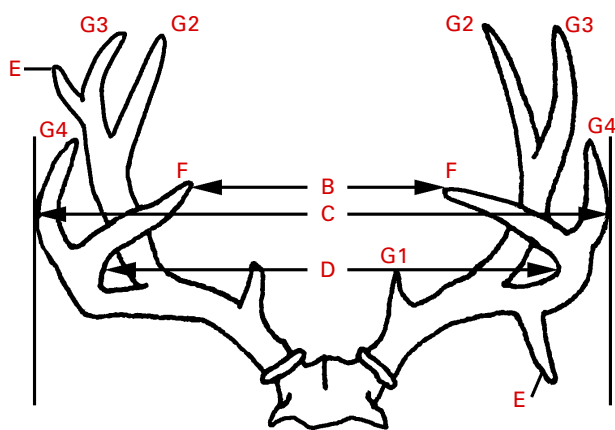
By Jay A. Lesser

I was just 50 yards from the crest of the ridge and the pile of boulders that would serve as my hidden observation point for glassing the high mountain basin that lay beyond. Stopping for one last breather, I leaned my rifle against a stunted pine and took off my daypack. As I pulled out my spotting scope and collapsible tripod, I shivered with anticipation of the big buck mule deer I hoped to see in the basin.

It was almost 10:00 a.m. and I had been climbing steadily for the last three hours, but there was no need to rush, I had plenty of time. I intended to glass the basin carefully for bedded deer, hopefully spotting the buck of my dreams, and carefully execute the necessary stalk, all before the bucks rose from their beds for their evening meal.

Gathering my equipment I slowly made my way up the ridge to the boulder pile. Being careful not to show myself to the inhabitants of the basin, I dropped to my hands and knees and crawled around the last large boulder. As I came around I was startled to see another hunter lying on "my" ledge intently looking through his spotting scope at some distant object. Not really wanting to startle this fellow into a 60 foot swan dive, I quietly said "Seen any deer?" He snapped around, his eyes wide, blinked a few times and stammered, "Yeah, a couple." After a brief pause he said what both of us were thinking, "You scared the hell out of me. I thought I was the only one who knew about this place."

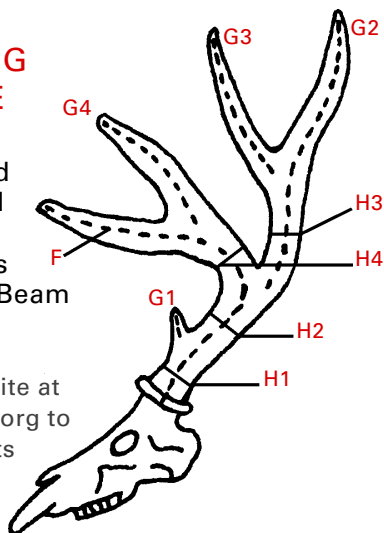
In the muffled conversation that followed we introduced ourselves and found that we had much in common, including the fact that we had both picked the same spot to look for our dream deer. When my new friend realized I had no hard feelings and intended to quietly back out leaving the basin to him, he confided that he had glassed the area thoroughly but had only found a small group of three deer.




UNDERSTANDING A TYPICAL MULE DEER FRAME

- B - Tip to Tip Spread
- C - Greatest Spread
- D - Inside Spread
- E - Abnormal Points
- F - Length of Main Beam
- G - Normal Points
- H - Circumferences

Visit the Club's web site at www.boone-crockett.org to download score charts with detailed scoring instructions.





On the average mature mule deer buck, with its ears in an alert position, he will have an ear span of 20 to 22 inches tip-to-tip.

FIELD JUDGING

The beaming grin on his face as he encouraged me to take a look through his spotting scope hinted at what I would see. As I adjusted the focus on his 25 power compact, two large mule deer bucks seemed to materialize out of the sparse brush and scattered rocks on the opposite slope about 800 yards away. Further study revealed a third slightly below and to the left of the others. All three blended perfectly into their surroundings.

"You see that biggest one?" he asked. "He's what I've been after for years. I'm willing to bet he'll make the book."

"He sure is a good one, in fact they all look pretty good." I replied. "Have you figured out how you're going to approach them?"

I listened as he explained the route he intended to take, his choice of landmarks, his use of the wind and his intended shooting location. It was a very well thought out stalk and seemed foolproof.

"Why don't you come with me?" He asked. "There are three bucks and I only need one."

"No," I replied. "Two hunters make twice as much noise and those talus slopes are going to be a challenge to get across quietly even by yourself. I'll just stay here and watch the show, then when you get him I'll come across and give you a hand."

As my new friend gathered his equipment to leave I wished him luck and reminded him not to rush his stalk. He had plenty of time and those bucks had no reason to

move unless they heard, saw or winded him.

After he left, I set-up my Swarovski AT-80 spotting scope. Not the most compact scope on the market, but with an 80mm objective lens for low light situations, the superb clarity, and a 45 degree angled 20-60x variable eyepiece to ease neck strain, it is my constant hunting companion. Zeroing in on the bucks, I eased the power up on the scope as much as the heat waves would allow and began my visual evaluation.

The buck on the lower left lay staring contentedly across the basin in my general direction. His most predominate feature was his antler width, 32 to 34 inches outside spread. He had a brow tine on his right antler but not on his left and appeared to have medium weight mass, perhaps 5 to 5-1/2 inch bases. As if on que he turned his head to look at his companions, which gave me a good side view of his rack. He had three points on each side with the rear point or G-2 standing about 15 inches high on the main beam.

Next I moved my attention to the buck on the upper left. He had a spread of about 26 inches, the same mass as the first buck and well-developed brow tines on each antler. When he finally gave me a side view I could see he had four symmetrical points on each side, with well-developed forks. The G-2s rising about 15 inches above the main beam is a beautiful classic 5 x 5 adult mule deer buck.

The buck on the upper right literally took my breath away. He appeared to have a 28 or 29 inch outside spread. He had outstanding brow tines, but his most predominate features were his antler height and mass. His rack appeared to be as tall as it was wide and his antlers looked as thick as my wrist, seven inches I estimated. When he finally gave me a side view, I wasn't disappointed. He had four symmetrical points on a side with incredibly deep forks, the G-2s rising over 20 inches above the main beams. I lay watching him for the better part of an hour, visually estimating his every antler feature and mentally totaling the numbers. His cumulative score, as close as I could estimate, would easily surpass the minimum B&C

score for typical mule deer. He was a true once-in-a-lifetime buck. I began to regret not going on the stalk as invited but hunting etiquette and my conscience said it was this other fellow's chance, he was here first and he had earned it.

As I took a break from the spotting scope I noticed a glint like a signal mirror about 300 yards above and to the left of the bucks. Zeroing the scope on it showed that my friend had successfully made it to the final phase of his stalk. He was now looking the bucks over one last time with his spotting scope. As he slipped out-of-sight I moved the scope back to the bucks. His intended route would bring him down a ravine within 75 yards of the deer, but hidden from my view.

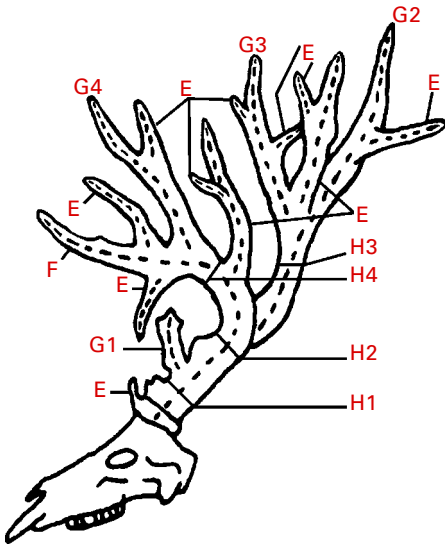
About 10 minutes later, as I watched the three deer, the upper left buck turned to look toward the ravine. An instant later the wide antlered buck's head dropped to the ground. The other two bucks exploded from their beds, jumping from my scope's field of view. Then the sound of the shot reached me. The wide antlered buck lay motionless.

It took me 20 minutes to make my way over to them. As I walked up to the hunter, who was obviously overjoyed, he waved his tape measure and shouted "He has a 33-1/2-inch spread, I knew he was over 30 inches. My cousin says any deer with a 30-inch spread will make the book."

I shook his hand and congratulated him; "You've taken a trophy mule deer that most hunters only dream about. I wouldn't worry too much about the record books. He is your personal best and that makes him your personal world record."

"Do you know how to score one?" he asked.

"No, I don't." I lied and I didn't tell him what I thought of the other two bucks that got away. I firmly believe the word trophy can and should be used to describe any game animal taken in fair chase regardless of the size or gender but this man had worked hard for a record book buck and didn't recognize it when his chance finally came. It made me realize that being able to field judge a big game animal and having a basic idea of



THE ANATOMY OF A NON-TYPICAL MULE DEER FRAME

Abnormal points are those non-typical in location such as points originating from a point or from the bottom or the sides of the main beam, or any points beyond the normal pattern of five (including the beam tip) per antler.

the B&C scoring system can increase your chances of taking that outstanding specimen should the opportunity present itself. The ability to field judge big game animals has other applications too, such as being able to tell the difference between mature and immature animals, or perhaps you want to try to better your personal best trophy of a given species.

Since this is about field judging mule deer, I will give you some tips on ways to estimate a mule deer's trophy features in the field. I will also point out the trophy features most important to help them score well.

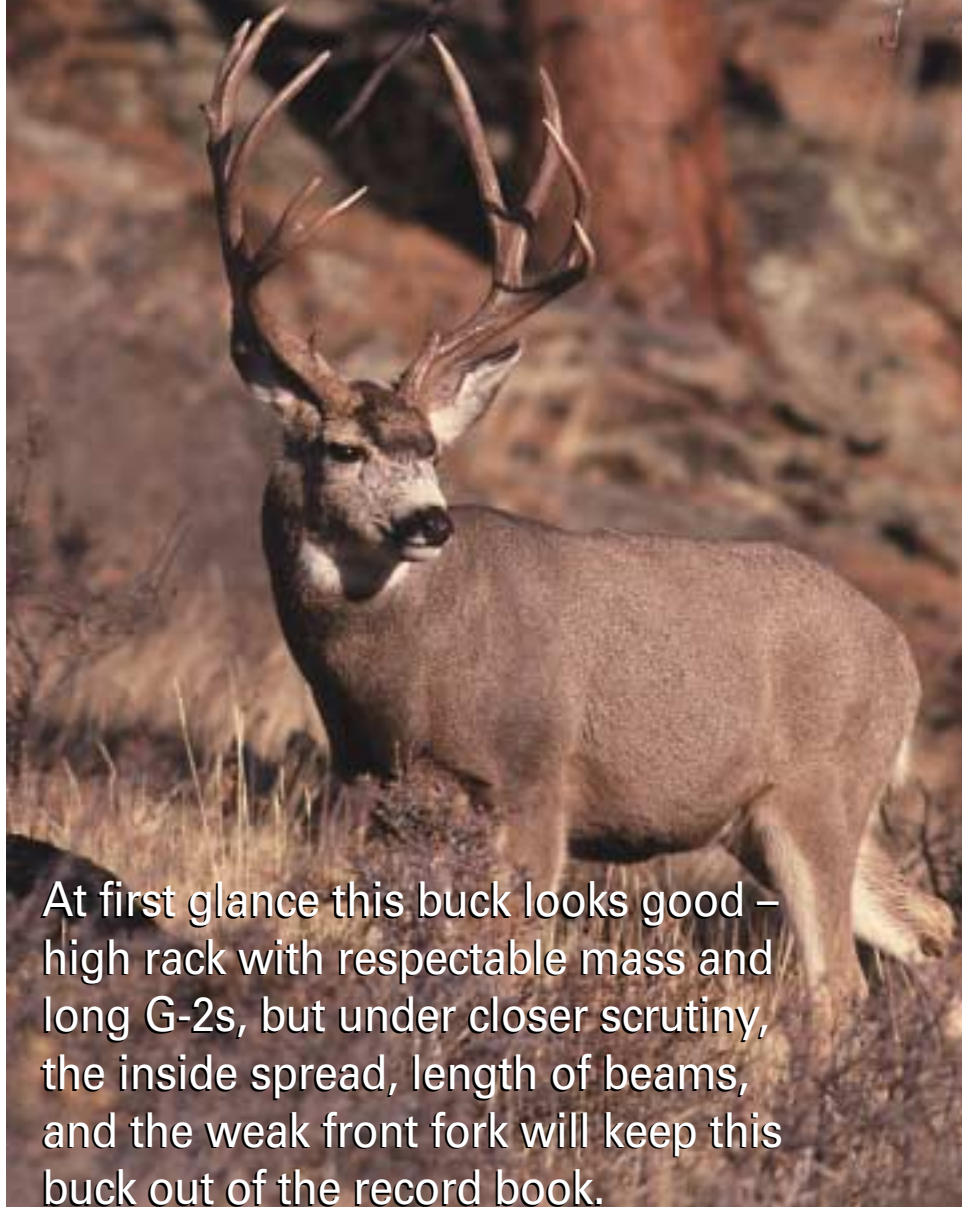
JUDGING MULE DEER

Mule deer may not have as much going on above their heads as other members of the deer family, like elk and moose, but judging them in the field can be just as tricky. Accurately field judging a mule deer buck's trophy status starts with knowing the basics of scoring a mule deer. Under the Boone and Crockett Club's scoring system, the gross score for a typical mule deer is the sum total of measurements of his inside spread, length of his main beams, length of points, and eight mass or circumference measurements. By definition, a typical mule deer will have four points per side, plus eye guards. Under field conditions we don't always have the time to pull out a calculator, however, there are a few things we can quickly look for to determine whether a buck would be a record book qualifier.

For starters, quality optics are a must. Accurately summing up a buck in the field can require close scrutiny and you must be able to see clearly, in all kinds of light, and often times from great distances. Picking a bedded buck out of the landscape can mean hours behind your optics, and quality glass simply gives you the sharpest picture and is less fatiguing on the eyes. Top end binoculars and spotting



While sizing up his forks, pay attention to fork symmetry. Do the back forks and front forks match their counterparts on the opposite antler in depth and tine length? In scoring, symmetry is a factor.



At first glance this buck looks good – high rack with respectable mass and long G-2s, but under closer scrutiny, the inside spread, length of beams, and the weak front fork will keep this buck out of the record book.

FIELD JUDGING

scopes from manufacturers like, Leica, Swarovski, Leupold, and Zeiss are mainstays of hard-core mule deer hunters.

Once you've dialed in on your buck the first thing to check is his overall frame. This is the part where, "If he looks big, he is big" can come into play. A buck's frame takes into account all factors used in scoring — the inside spread, length of

buck may be scored as a non-typical and the length of the abnormal points are added to the score. The overwhelming majority of bucks that make the book are five-point bucks (western count — four points per side, plus the eye guards). A buck with good eye guards (3+ inches) is a bonus. If he is at least a 5x5, including the eye guards, move on to fork depth. Deep forks translate into long tines and high scores. The deeper his forks, front and back, the longer his tines will be.

While sizing up his forks, pay attention to fork symmetry. Do the back forks and front forks match their counterparts on the opposite antler in depth and tine length? In scoring, symmetry is a factor. It is common to see bucks with strong back forks but weak fronts (crab claws) and vice-versa.

Next, check for mass. The mass or circumference of the main beam is also a consideration in scoring, but it can be tough to judge in the field. Mass can be estimated by comparing the circumference of the antler to the buck's eye. A mule deer's eye will measure about four inches in circumference. By using his eye as a gauge you can visualize whether his bases and main beams are at least 4-inches or larger. Heavy bases (6+ inches) with this kind of mass carried out through his main beams (5 to 4 inches), means a buck will receive high marks in the circumference category.

Your last check is spread. By now you've already accessed his spread when checking his frame, but it will help to pin down a spread measurement before you tally everything. To accurately judge antler spread, we can use a buck's ear width as a gauge. On the average mature mule deer buck, with its ears in an alert position, he will have an ear span of 20 to 22 inches tip-to-tip. But I have measured large specimens with ear tip to tip spans up to 26 inches. However, if you always use the 20 to 22 inch estimate your buck is less likely to suffer "ground shrinkage." So with this estimate a buck's rack past his ears by two inches means an inside spread in the neighborhood of 24 inches — more than enough to put him in the book if the rest adds up.

THE TALLY

After judging all these antler fea-

tures you should be able to put your buck into one of three categories; obviously a shooter and book contender, a buck on the bubble that may require actually adding up the numbers to see if he will make 180 (B&C typical minimum), or just one heck of a nice buck. If he's on the edge, you might have to put a number on each feature that counts in final scoring and mentally add them up for a rough score to make your decision. Here, you can use his ears again to estimate each number. On most mature bucks it is approximately eight inches from the white spot at the base of the ear to the ear tip. If you visually superimpose this feature to the antler, you can accurately estimate things like length of main beam, height of the rack and length of the points.

THE TRAPS

There can be a lot of hurdles to overcome in accurate field judging. Getting enough time to look your buck over closely is one. Seeing all the angles so you can count points and access fork depth is another. There are also a few "X" factors that can throw you a curve, like antler coloration and background. Bucks sporting darker horns can appear to have more mass than a tape can give them credit for. Conversely, lighter colored antlers can appear to be thinner than they really are. Background can also trick you. If your buck is standing with snow as a backdrop, antler mass can appear greater. If he is standing in the shadows or in low light, his antlers can also appear to be thinner. Another common illusion in all field judging is the power of your optics. If you are viewing, at fairly close range, with your spotting scope on 60x, even an average 5x5 can look like a monster. Back off your power to a reasonable setting so you can compare him to his body features.

Bucks on the move leave little time for a really good look. You may not be able to get past frame and mass before you have to make a decision. Bucks traveling away from you always appear bigger than they are, and watch for other bucks. Having other bucks in view to compare with can be helpful. They can also trick you if you don't



Picking a bedded buck out of the landscape can mean hours behind your optics,

points, length of the main beams, and mass. If you're looking at a high racked buck with long points and a spread past his ears, you just might be looking at a buck that warrants a full evaluation. As a rule, high, wide, and heavy is what to look for, especially if you're beyond trophy and thinking record book.

After frame, try and get a clean look at the number of points, fork depth, and symmetry. Any additional or "abnormal" points are subtracted from the typical score. However, if there are enough abnormal points, a




If there are enough abnormal points, it may be scored as a non-typical and the length of the abnormal points are added to the score.

pay close attention to how big they really are compared to the best buck in the bunch.

Also, if it's been a while since you've seen a quality buck, either from season to season, or if you have gone a few days on the same hunt without seeing one, the first buck you see may seem bigger than he really is. If you have the time, settle down and run your mental checklist.

Lastly, a 30-inch spread is the ideological benchmark most mule deer enthusiasts look for in a trophy. Often times outside spread is all that gets noticed, as illustrated by my newfound hunting buddy mentioned earlier. Keep in mind, spread looks good on the wall, but in scoring, inside spread between the main beams is all that counts and it's only one measurement. There are plenty of bucks in the record book with 25-inch inside spreads.

As with all acquired skills, accurate field judging comes with practice. The more bucks you have a chance to put a mental tape on the better you will become at judging them before deciding to tag 'em or pass 'em. Nothing beats sizing up live game under field conditions when the pressure is on. This builds confidence and speed in your assessment. But, if you are like most of us, time in the field seeing trophy-class bucks can be hard to come by. The next best thing is to estimate the score of mounted heads, then put a tape on them. You'll be surprised how close you can come with a little practice. ▲▲▲



They all look better going away, but this is the type of spread dreams are made of.